WHEN THE BLINDED SOLDIER
RETURNS

Fraser Bond

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By Fraser Bond

In World War I about one out of every one thousand soldiers disabled in the service of their country lost his sight. Statistics of the United Nations, as far as they are available show that the same tragic story is being repeated in the present conflict. This means that of every thousand casualties, one is destined to go through life in a perpetual blackout. Foreseeing this eventuality, workers for the blind in the United States are bending every effort to devise ways and means of meeting this problem when the first impact of the returned wounded begins to be felt in this country.

As soon as the United States entered the war, these workers set up a committee under the chairmanship of Robert B. Irwin, sightless Executive Director of the American Foundation for the Blind, New York City, for the purpose of considering the question of the care, treatment, and aftercare of soldiers, sailors, and airmen blinded while in war service, and to prepare recommendations for the Federal Government on this problem.

These recommendations will include, among other things, provision for the early establishment of contact in hospitals with men blinded in the war; the immediate application of therapeutic measures, such as the teaching of handicraft; the setting up of training centers to which the men can be moved and where their vocational abilities can be determined, and later, arrangements made for their rehabilitation in their local communities by local agencies.

Blindness in war, as in civilian life, cuts through every economic and social stratum. Accordingly, the American Foundation for the Blind has always stressed the desirability of individual consideration and treatment of each person without sight. This means that in the case of the war-blind, each service man's education, tastes, temperament and abilities will be studied with a view to seeing to it that rehabilitation is as accurately as possible fitted to the individual.

In England where already war-blinded men and women are learning to live in their new dark world, this plan has been followed with excellent results. For example, one young airman who was found to possess a particularly delicate and sensitive touch, has been trained to fit instruments into the instrument-boards of airplanes. So adept has he become that he can now fit twenty of such boards per day, as compared with a maximum of seventeen achieved by sighted workers on the same type of job.

Workers for the blind, as well as blinded veterans of the last war, seem agreed upon the need and the desirability of specialized treatment for the war-blinded as distinguished from treatment of the war-disabled in general, or from the treatment of civilian

own, or becoming a leader in your community's church activities, or some similar level of achievement within the range of your possibilities —providing you work for it.

If you read the simple success stories in your local paper or hear of people in your town who have made good you come to know that success may be just around the corner. In our neighborhood there lives a man who has built up a good business by boarding dogs for people who are out of town. A simple idea, yet others had failed, when they tried it. "I just kept on plugging even when the going was tough, while the others gave up," he says. And there is a woman who makes a nice living by selling home-made bread on the Farmer's Market. "So many women know how to bake bread. Perhaps I tried a little harder than the rest of them to get a loaf just right to sell," she said.

That's all you need to do: try a little harder than the rest of them. Even the nationally known success stories prove it. Duncan Hines became famous by hunting out good eating places and writing about them —a thing anyone might have done.

The personnel manager of a great merchandising concern, told me, "Most of our salesmen are doing all right. The requirements are pretty stiff and they have been well trained. They all have ability, intelligence and energy. But only four out of one hundred have something in addition. Call it extra force, or will power, or the ability to concentrate. Those four per cent are our future executives. The rest will remain what they are—good, plain salesmen."

The world is pretty well geared to make it possible for the slowpoke to get along. It isn't true that so many people "never had a chance." They merely failed to see it. Or they were not ready when it came.

The other day, in California, I spoke to an American Pilot Officer who had done an heroic job in the Dutch Indies. With fuel running low, he was forced to take the shortest way back to his base, right through a terrific Jap anti-aircraft barrage. He had to climb up to twenty-six thousand feet. There was no artificial oxygen equipment in the plane. One crew-member after the other was showing the dangerous symptoms of altitude sickness, cramps, sinus headache, a paroxysm of coughing. Finally they fell into unconsciousness—the prelude to death, as the pilot well knew. Though he felt overcome by a blurred torpor and felt so weak he couldn't even turn his head, the pilot, through a super-human effort, managed to fight down his stupor. He was the only man still conscious in the plane. He brought his crew back in the nick of time and saved their lives. He was awarded a high decoration.

"Up to twenty-four thousand feet it wasn't so bad," he said, "but the last one thousand feet were plenty tough, and I won't forget those decisive five minutes. It was 'do or die' for all of us, so I thought I'd better do it."

blind. This line of separate identity was the one followed in England after the last war and now firmly established there—a plan which has proved to have very definite advantages and benefits.

One of the most important of these is the effect on morale. Veterans who lost their sight in World War I, while admitting that they had gained much through contact with the civilian blind, are quick to state that segregation with their war-blinded "buddies" during the early weeks of their blindness and their subsequent months of training had given them a sense of comradeship in their new circumstance which had been of incalculable value in keeping up their spirits.

Because the general public has a natural sympathy for blind men and women—a sympathy strengthened when such blindness has come as a result of service in the country's forces—that same generous public must now be on its guard against spurious appeals for its financial aid. Already instances of this particular brand of war racketeering have been observed. Organizations are using in their appeals for funds implications that blinded soldiers are dependent upon them for their training, which there is every reason to believe will be provided at the expense of the Federal Government.

The Foundation, as a national organization, and other established agencies affiliated with the American Association of Workers for the Blind, are warning the public to be on their guard against all independent appeals for private financial support of special services for war-blinded individuals.

If a picture so dark can be said to have a brighter side, it is this: the veteran returning from the present war comes back to a world made far easier for him to live in and enjoy than the world which welcomed back his predecessor of World War I. In the intervening years, work for the blind, and a broader general understanding of their problems have progressed hand in hand. Many mechanical aids await him, to simplify readjustment and to help make more productive his hours of work and his hours of leisure.

If he learns braille, or finger-reading, as he probably will during his months of convalescence, he will find available a braille typewriter on which he can type out, not only notes which he wishes to keep for his own reference, but intimate letters to his sightless contemporaries, letters which do not have to pass through the eye of a third person.

First in importance to help him in his new situation stands the Talking Book. "What on earth is a Talking Book?" he will ask. "Do you mean to tell me that a volume, a novel, or a mystery thriller, will actually sit down and read itself aloud to me?" The answer will be substantially, "Yes."

The Talking Book consists of albums of long-playing phonographic discs on which trained readers from stage and radio have recorded hundreds of novels, biographies, plays, books of humor and of travel, as well as college text-books. When placed on

a reading machine similar in appearance to a portable phonograph, and so contrived that blind people can easily manipulate it by touch, these books read themselves aloud. In a short time the sightless soldier will forget completely that he is listening to a mechanical thing, and come to regard these albums of discs as books in a very real sense, books which just happen to be written in sound rather than in inkprint.

Talking Books of so many types already await him that the veteran is sure to find many from which he will gain sheer delight. The titles range all the way from Irwin S. Cobb to the Psalms of David. The blinded sailor, for instance, home from the sea, may perhaps relive some of his own marine experiences when the Talking Book embarks on John Masefield's quick-paced narrative, *The Bird of Dawning*.

"But what about the cost of these things?" the sightless veteran may well ask.

As far as the Talking Book is concerned, both books and reading machine are his for the asking. Each year Congress approves an appropriation from Uncle Sam's treasury to be used for reading for the adult blind, and each year a certain percentage of this amount is earmarked for books that are "written" in sound. Each new title, when completed, is placed by the Library of Congress in twenty-seven regional libraries from coast to coast, and, packed in stout cartons, the phonographic albums which make up the Talking Books, travel between library and Talking Book reader post age free.

Then, too, the sightless veteran o the present war will find his journey ings around the country vastly more simplified than would have been possible at the time of the last armistice. Concessions now exist whereby blind persons can travel by railroad and by bus with a companion or guide for the price of a single fare. This means that blind people are now relieved of all the strain of unaccompanied travel and its hazards.

The brightest fact of all is that service men who return without sight will come back to a land more fully conscious than ever that its blind citizens can play an important part in the nation's life. The war, perhaps more than any other single cause, has brought the special capabilities of sightless people to the attention of the general public. The shortage of man power in industry which it has caused has resulted in the opening of many doors of opportunity to sightless workers who have been quick to prove their worth. For years they have needed only this opportunity to demonstrate their ability along a hundred different lines. They have now convinced private enterprise of their skill and efficiency in jobs which require a highly developed tactile sense and unusual powers of concentration. It can confidently be expected that these doors of opportunity opened by the war will swing in even wider welcome to the men and women who have given their sight in their country's service.

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